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ABSTRACT

Guided readers are written so students of English as a second language (ESL) can read them without supervision, and graded for different levels of reading competence. A superlative guided reader allows the student to read with such comfort and assurance that he will forget English is not his native language, be willing to guess, and become interested in the story or information. Excellence in a guided reader may be achieved through the control of syntax, vocabulary, and content. Publishers have varying prescriptions for sentence length and complexity, tense and voice usage, readability, and word lists. The reader must also have materials that the publisher considers suitable. Publisher-author contracts often reflect the sensibilities of the target market. Subject matter, characterization, and plot should be carefully considered. Simplification continues to create controversy, and ideally, ESL students should have well-written stories just for them. Principles of writing guided readers are in some ways similar to those for writing short stories. Certain devices are peculiar to the guided reader, and some are especially suitable to it. The guided reader writer must be explicit and redundant. If the text encourages the learner to read alone, a barrier to his progress will be eliminated. (MSE)

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SOME CONSIDERATIONS WHEN WRITNG A GUIDED READER

A guided reader is a book which has been written so that an ESL/EFL student will be able to read it without supervision. Guided readers are graded to suit different levels of reading competence. A guided reader should be a pleasure for the student to read, and provide motivation for the student to continue reading.

A superlative guided reader will have the ESL or EFL student reading with such comfort and pleasure that he forgets that English is not his native tongue. He will be happy to try to guess, and will be wrapped up in the events of the story, or enthralled by the information. A good guided reader will approach this standard.

Excellence in a guided reader may be achieved by the control of syntax, vocabulary and content.

Control of syntax:

Different publishers have different prescriptions for sentence length and complexity. For example, at the first level they may suggest, like Heinemann, "a maximum of two clauses in either compound or complex sentences. A maximum of two prepositional phrases or adverbials if the sentence is simple. If the sentence is compound or complex, one prepositional phrase or adverbial per clause. Simple past participal adjectival phrases may be used when the meaning is unambiguous.

Second level: A maximum of three clauses per sentence, but fewer if they contain a number pf prepositional phrases, adverbials, or adjectival phrases.

Third level: A maximum of four clauses but, as always, the more complicated the clause, the fewer the clauses permitted per sentence."

Prescriptions like these involve the recognition that lower level guided readers should be written using short sentences, because they are easier to understand.

This is borne out in studies with native speakers of English. However, there are dangers. Only simple ideas can be put in short sentences, and there is a danger of jerkiness when lots of short sentences following one another.

Some publishers insist upon the present tense for lower level guided readers. The author must exercise considerable skill to make the work read easily if he is not permitted the full flow of the time range. However, some authors choose the present tense for books for native speaker adults: Donald Barthelme's Paradise is a case in point.

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Most ESL/EFL publishers suggest the use of the active voice wherever possible. So do the authors of books prescribed for creative writing classes for native speakers. I quote from Janet Burroway, in Writing Fiction, page 86: "if your prose is to be vigorous as well as vivid, if your characters are to be people who do rather than people to whom things are done, if your descriptions are to 'come to life,' you must make use of the active voice."

Subjunctives are frequently banned, but a few creep in, mainly because words (and ideas) like **hope** and **wish** are so common. However, the writer is wise to try to make the construction as simple as possible.

Tag questions tend to be confusing, and are best left out of the script until the intermediate level. Negative questions (you don't find that confusing, do you?) should be ommitted from lower level readers.

There are various readability scales, for example the Fry scale or the Spache scale. These devise formulas based on sentence length and the number of syllables in the words used, and were initially designed for use with reading materials for native speakers. It is now recognised that readability is also influenced by content, and that this variable is hard to account for. The scales, however, are useful for testing work: if the publisher requests a 2.5 on a particular scale, there is an objective measurement for reference. It is simplest to say that if the students are at elementary level, one should remember that the sentences should be short. This will in turn force short words and simple ideas upon the writer. It is always easy to make something longer, but rather more difficult to express an idea with economy, grace, and brevity.

Publishing houses have different attitudes to word lists. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich had graded lists for their books for the Japanese market. The lists were sensible enough, because there is an essential core of words necessary to the understanding of English. Having passed this, however, lists become arbitrary and restrictive. The HBJ list at its first (and lowest) level included **guitar**. Why not **drum**, if there is to be a musical instrument? However, guitar was needed for a story, and therefore became part of the list.

In Hong Kong the Education Department's Curriculum Development Committee publishes a list of words which every child should have been exposed to by the end of Primary 6 (Sixth grade). There are 1200 words on the list, and this small number means that they are usually essential words. However, the choices are still arbitrary.

Witman English Readers of Hong Kong favor an illustrated glossary at the end of their books. The Department of Education discourages Hong Kong publishers from using translation

in their books. Many other countries, however, permit the translation of difficult words or phrases, and in an EFL situation this is reasonable.

My own preference goes to internal gloss: to making the context explain the word. My example is the word **dizzy**, and the supposed readers are late intermediate students in Hong Kong. In it a brave police woman is on a ledge twenty two stories up with a very disturbed youth twice her size, and she feels dizzy. "Don't look down, you fool!" she scolds herself. "You've never been very good in high places." A few sentences later, the young man says, "I can't to look over the side. It makes my head go funny." He chants "my head goes round, and round..." If the students who recognized dizzy as an unfamiliar word did not look it up, and managed to guess that **dizzy** describes an unpleasant feeling which comes when looking down from a great height, the internal gloss is successful.

Control of content

The guided reader must have material which is perceived to be suitable. In fact, the contract will probably have a clause where the author protects the publisher if there is scandalous or libelous material in the publication. Social and political values will be conservative, and families tend to be ideal. The sensibilities of the target market will be considered.

Subject matter, characterisation, and plot.

It seems very likely that familiar subject matter will be easier, and more interesting, for ESL/EFL students to read. It will also give the author the opportunity to contextualize vocabulary, and the student the courage to guess at the meaning of words, thereby encouraging independent reading.

The other side of familiarity is identification. If the students can identity with the problems being faced by the protagonist, the story will interest them more. Jane Eyre is highly remote to those who live in Kuala Lumpur. The cold of northern England is incomprehensible in the tropics, and so are Victorian manners and mores. A story about a young Malay woman whose parents oppose her marriage to a Chinese is far more approachable.

Ideally, each EFL group will have well written stories just for them. Unfortunately the market may well be too small for a publishing house to be interested. A good solution in the ESL environment is to seek stories about the mutual experiences of students who come to live in the host country.

Controversy still attends the simplification of stories. Joyce Valdes, in a private conversation, described the results as "Moby Dick without the whale." Perhaps the problems with the simplified classics are cultural rather than

literary. Of course, this works both ways: Chinese myths, even in simple English, are confusing to American and Australian native speaker children who find the unfamiliar names, stories and concepts hard to grasp.

Simplification of reference texts is very valuable, as far as it is possible. The limitations seem to be imposed by the nature of the material. There comes a point where a concept is too complex to be explained in simple language.

The needs of the reader ESL and EFL books are different, in that the ESL student is entering a culture, and so needs books which are predominantly of that new culture. The EFL student does not have this need to have a new culture opened to him: his need for English is likely to be commercial and professional. He needs to learn about the culture, but he does not wish to become part of it.

WRITING WITHIN THE RESTRICTIONS IMPOSED BY THE GUIDED READER.

Parallels with the short story:

Most of the comments made here apply equally to writing a short story for native speakers. In fact, there are interesting parallels.

A reader is usually about eight chapters long. The chapters are ideally of equal length because that makes classroom administration easier. This means that elementary books have chapters of about 1 000 words each, and advanced readers may have up to 1 500 words. Put another way: the book is 8 000 to 12 000 words long. This falls within the range of the short story.

Short story writers are urged to remember that a short story is a miniature. They should restrict the number of important characters in the story. This is also true for the guided reader. There should not be more than three important characters in a chapter, and no more than four in a book. This means, of course, that writers employ a lot of E. M. Forster's "flat" characters: they are there to further the story, and nothing more. The principal characters must be real.

The short story writer must observe the unities of time, place, and character. Short stories and guided readers are not opportunities for enormous sweeping flash backs or peeks into the future: nor are they vehicles for travelogues, or birth to death narratives. This is not meant to exclude the development of the central character, although in both cases the writer is likely to concentrate on particular features of that character.

The characters in a short story, or in a guided reader, should reveal themselves by what they say and do. Lengthy passages of gratuitous analysis are not required. If a

character is bad tempered, the reader should not be told: he should see the character kick the cat. Action will be reasonable if it springs from the nature of the protagonists.

Devices peculiar to the guided reader:

Headings and sub-headings help the progress of the guided reader, but look strange in the short story. Questions also help check comprehension, although they are a constant reminder to the reader that this is a book to work with.

Devices suitable to the guided reader:

The guided reader should have something happen on every page. The reader should be frequently rewarded for reading: the question "What next?" should hover in the reader's mind. This is a matter of degree: the short story also has rewards, but they are more delayed. The story line of a guided reader must be strong enough to carry the reader on to the next page.

The ESL guided reader should ideally introduce the student to the culture he is reading about. The guided reader interprets culture as well as language.

Challenges to be met by writer of the guided reader:

The author of a guided reader must be explicit and unsubtle. He cannot use implied relationships, meanings, motives or intentions. Every step of the story should be made explicit. This may sound dull, but both the culture and the language are unfamiliar to the reader.

"No single word, phrase, sentence or reference can carry too much information. No word, phrase, sentence or reference can be so critical to an understanding of the events of the story that, if its meaning is not grasped, the reader will become lost or muddled." (Heinemann Hong Kong Guideline for Authors).

Redundancy helps here. Nothing ever gets said just one way. One character says "Good Morning," his friend replies "Hello."

Where the author who is writing a short story can choose his words for their connotations, and expect the reader to be enriched, this does not apply to the author of a guided reader. The vocabulary must be simple enough to make the reader willing to proceed alone. Every situation must be contextualised. "David's blushing. He can feel his face going red. Why does he always say something silly when he's with Soraya?"

If guided readers can encourage students to enjoy reading, independently, and to want to read another story, the world is well served. If teachers can encourage students to

try to read alone, a great barrier to their progress will fall. These readers are very useful, and often sadly neglected.

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